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Guidelines for Evaluating Start-Up Grant Applications

1. Introduction

“Guidelines for Evaluating Start-Up Grant Applications” is a document which specifies the evaluation criteria set forth in the directive “Conditions and Procedure for Start-Up Grants” by the Estonian Research Council (hereinafter *Council*).

2. Relevant terms

Research grants are funding instruments allocated for a high-quality research and development (R&D) project carried out by a person or a research group working at an R&D institution, incl. the research scholarships for students (as specified in the Organisation of Research and Development Act). There are three categories of research grants corresponding to different levels of a research career: postdoctoral grants, start-up grants, and team grants:

- A postdoctoral grant is a grant aimed at supporting the launch of a research career of the people with a doctoral degree or equivalent qualification at strong R&D institutions or among highly qualified research groups. There are two types of postdoctoral grants:
 - a grant for a postdoctoral researcher coming to Estonia (incoming postdoctoral grant);
 - a grant for a postdoctoral researcher going abroad (outgoing postdoctoral grant).
- A **start-up grant** is a grant aimed at supporting researchers with initial research experience to launch their independent research career at an Estonian R&D institution, to set up their research group, and to contribute to educating the next generation of researchers (incl. doctoral students).
- A team grant is a grant aimed at supporting researchers working at Estonian R&D institutions in continuing their research career, ensuring high-quality research, leading a strong research group, and educating the next generation of researchers (incl. doctoral students).

3. Criteria for applying

A **Principal Investigator of a start-up project** is a person who:

- 3.1. has obtained a doctoral degree or equivalent qualification no less than two and no more than seven years prior to the 1st of January of the year the project is scheduled to begin. The Evaluation Committee may, where justified, consider eligible a person who has been awarded his/her first doctoral degree or equivalent qualification more than seven years prior to the 1st of January of the year the project is scheduled to begin. In that case, the maximum effective time elapsed since the award of the first doctoral degree can be reduced, but only in certain properly documented circumstances, e.g., parental leave and compulsory military service;

- 3.2. has acquired research experience (e.g., as a postdoctoral fellow, researcher at an R&D institution, etc., preferably in a foreign country) after obtaining his/her doctoral degree or equivalent qualification;
- 3.3. is employed full-time at the institution and has a place of work in Estonia at the time of implementing the project. A Principal Investigator who is employed only part-time at an Estonian R&D institution (e.g., a healthcare practitioner) can be considered eligible by the Evaluation Committee if this does not jeopardise the successful realisation of the project.

4. Processing Grant Applications

The application process takes place in the Estonian Research Information System (hereinafter *ETIS*). The submission of the application and the communication with the applicant is conducted via ETIS.

5. Application

The application for a start-up grant (hereinafter *application*) shall include the following:

- 5.1. the name of the applicant;
- 5.2. the title of the project in Estonian and in English;
- 5.3. a summary of the project in Estonian and in English;
- 5.4. the requested grant period;
- 5.5. the scientific background of the project, incl. the interdisciplinarity and intersectorality of the project (if applicable);
- 5.6. the main objectives of the project, hypotheses (excl. justified exceptional cases), methods, and the work plan together with risk reduction measures and a back-up plan, incl. tentative annual work plans and the availability of the infrastructure necessary for achieving the objectives of the project;
- 5.7. the expected results and their potential applicability, importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy;
- 5.8. an explanation about how the results of the project will be disseminated to the wider public;
- 5.9. an explanation about how the compliance with ethical issues will be secured during the implementation of the project and a comment on whether the project requires a licence from a specific ethics committee or the licence has already been obtained, and if the project necessitates compliance with the Nagoya Protocol, an explanation about which genetic resources will be used and whether the project requires the due diligence declaration or the due diligence declaration has already been submitted;
- 5.10. a summary, which is optional, of a project on the same subject matter that has been submitted during the previous call(s) describing the changes made compared to the previous application(s) and explaining if the changes stem from the feedback given by the reviewers;
- 5.11. an explanation about which data will be generated during the implementation of the project and how the data will be managed;
- 5.12. the grant type and amount applied for pursuant to the fixed amounts set out in the “Guidelines for Budgeting Grant Applications” as well as the justification for the budget, incl. the distribution of direct costs;
- 5.13. a description of the applicant’s previous R&D activities, indicating his/her contribution to the publications, industrial property item(s), and to the projects of great relevance for the

- implementation of the proposed project; the supervision experience of students. (Please keep in mind that the PI does not need to have previous team leadership and supervision experience);
- 5.14. the three most noteworthy results, including the references to the relevant publications, of the previous projects carried out with the research or mobility funding awarded by the Council (if applicable);
 - 5.15. information on the involvement of partners and experts as well as on the R&D cooperation necessary for the implementation of the project;
 - 5.16. the role of the (senior) research staff involved in the project and the distribution of their tasks;
 - 5.17. if necessary, additional documents;
 - 5.18. a confirmation that the principles of research ethics and good research practice will be adhered to during the conception and implementation of the project.

Please keep in mind that the applicants have a limited number of characters they can use to describe each part of their project.

6. Evaluation process

- 6.1. The grant applications will be evaluated by
 - 6.1.1. at least two independent reviewers. At least one of the reviewers must be from a foreign country;
 - 6.1.2. the Expert Panel who shall rely, although non-binding, on the evaluations and scores of the reviewers;
 - 6.1.3. the Evaluation Committee who shall rely, although non-binding, on the evaluations and scores of the reviewers and the Expert Panel.
- 6.2. If the previous grant of the applicant was awarded partially (for one year) and the applicant has submitted the same application without making any changes and is content with the previous reviews, then the application will not be reviewed again by the external reviewers. Only criterion 7 will be evaluated again by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee. The Evaluation Committee will give the application a new overall assessment and final score.
- 6.3. All applications are to be evaluated according to the same rules and procedures and all of them are treated equally. The final ranking list of the applications is formed by taking into consideration all relevant information and by comparing the applications in this particular call in field-specific (incl. sub-field-specific) ranking lists.
- 6.4. Field-specific overviews of the bibliometric indicators of the applicant as an additional material for evaluation could be used by the Expert Panel and by the Evaluation Committee for providing background information when evaluating the applications. The applicants will be informed once their overviews have been compiled and have the right to make clarifications.

7. Evaluation criteria and rating scale to be used for reviewing start-up grants

7.1. Evaluation criteria

When evaluating the applications, the following guiding questions are to be used for explaining the opinions clearly and for justifying the ratings. Please comment on all criteria.

Criterion	Guiding questions	Rating scale
<p>1. Justification for the research project, incl. originality and relevance of the idea, its potential contribution to the development of the research field; clarity and ambitiousness of objectives.</p>	<p>1.1. How significant is the project scientifically?</p> <p>1.2. To what extent is the research idea original and/or relevant to the research field?</p> <p>1.3. To what extent are the objectives ambitious?</p> <p>1.4. Have the objectives, hypotheses (excl. justified exceptional cases) and/or research questions been carefully considered and presented?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 1.</p>	<p>From 1 to 5</p>
<p>2. Feasibility of the project (research plan, risk assessment), incl. methods, resources, and infrastructure</p>	<p>2.1. Is the proposed research plan reasonable and plausible against the objectives of the project?</p> <p>2.2. Are the research methods appropriate?</p> <p>2.3. How well does the PI acknowledge potential scientific or methodological problem areas as well as the need for risk reduction measures and a back-up plan?</p> <p>2.4. Does the research environment, incl. the research infrastructure, support achieving the objectives of the proposed project?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 2.</p>	<p>From 1 to 5</p>
<p>3. Competence, expertise, and potential of the Principal Investigator</p>	<p>3.1. What are the merits and scientific expertise of the PI?</p> <p>3.2. Are the competences of the PI appropriate and sufficient for the proposed project (considering that the PI does not need to have previous team leadership and supervision experience)?</p> <p>3.3. Does the PI demonstrate the potential to lead independent research and show maturity?</p> <p>3.4. Is the PI's previous experience in participating in national and/or international projects sufficient for carrying out the proposed project successfully?</p> <p>3.5. If the PI has previously received funding from the Council, then has this project/have these projects been successful scientifically? <i>This question will be answered only by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee.</i></p> <p>Other comments on criterion 3.</p>	<p>From 1 to 5</p>
<p>4. Ethical issues</p> <p>The applicants are required to consider the potential risks</p>	<p>4.1. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly assessed whether the project raises the issues of research ethics (e.g., questions related to human</p>	<p>0 or 1</p>

<p>related to ethical issues of any procedure in the research projects. The applicants are asked to describe how the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of the subjects will be followed. The use of research methods that require a review or approval from a specific ethics committee should also be clearly indicated in the application (the need for such approvals will be checked by the Expert Panel). If the project necessitates compliance with the Nagoya Protocol, the applicant has to be aware of the fact that he/she has to obtain the due diligence declaration.</p>	<p>participation or involvement of animals; diversity issues; political, religious, societal, historical, and other sensitive topics, environmental intervention, etc.)?</p> <p>4.2. Has the applicant provided a description of the action plan whenever appropriate to address the legal requirements of research ethics (e.g., ethics committee approvals, specific research protocols, etc.) and described how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project?</p> <p>4.3. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly addressed potential research integrity risks which may arise during the project (e.g., credentials and questions of authorship, ownership of data and intellectual property, etc.)?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 4.</p>	
<p>5. Data management</p> <p>The applicants are expected to describe which data will be created, managed, collected, and protected; which methods and standards will be applied; will the data be shared or made public and in which way; how the data will be stored during the period of the project and preserved after the end of the project. The applicants are expected to consider the issues related to the secure storage of data either obtained or used during the period of the project and make them available based on the open data principles (if not restricted due to data protection requirements).</p>	<p>5.1. Has the applicant sufficiently, carefully, and properly described data management issues, incl. data storage and back-up, data protection, data ownership, (institutional) open data politics, etc.)?</p> <p>5.2. Has the applicant provided a description of the action plan whenever appropriate to address the legal requirements of data management (e.g., the collection, management, storage, and destruction of sensitive data; field-specific data protection requirements, etc.) and described how the requirements are to be met during the course of the project?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 5.</p>	0 or 1
<p>6. Importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy</p>	<p>6.1. Has the applicant adequately (considering the specifics of the research field and topic) described and justified the importance of the project for Estonia (outside academia)? Considering the specific</p>	From 1 to 5

<p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee</i></p>	<p>research field and/or the topic of the project it may include one or more of the following aspects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the project address important topical challenges (incl. social and cultural issues), nationally and/or internationally? Does the project help to improve social welfare, social cohesion, and/or national security? • Does the project help to solve important environmental challenges? • Could the project outcomes potentially initiate changes in government policies, standards, objectives, guidelines, services, deliveries, behaviours, etc.? • Does the project include cooperation between R&D institutions and/or government authorities and/or enterprises in Estonia? • Could the project be impactful or significant in some way not listed above? <p>6.2. Have the plans for public outreach (dissemination of the results among the wider public outside academia) been sufficiently considered?</p> <p>6.3. Is the topic significant in the Estonian context?</p> <p>6.4. If the previous grant of the applicant was awarded partially (for one year) and the applicant has submitted the same application, has the project started successfully?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 6.</p>	
<p>7. Justification for the grant type (small or big, experimental or non-experimental)</p> <p><i>This criterion will be evaluated only by the Expert Panel and the Evaluation Committee</i></p>	<p>7.1. Has the grant type been appropriately clarified and is it justified?</p> <p>7.2. Is the estimation of the costs of the project realistic against the objectives?</p> <p>Other comments on criterion 7.</p>	<p>0 or 1</p>

7.2. Rating procedure

7.2.1. A five-point rating scale is used for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6. The evaluation is provided to a level of precision of 0.5 points:

- Outstanding (5);
- Very good-Outstanding (4.5);

- Very good (4);
- Good-Very good (3.5);
- Good (3);
- Satisfactory-Good (2.5);
- Satisfactory (2);
- Unsatisfactory-Satisfactory (1.5);
- Unsatisfactory (1).

For criterion 6 (Importance for Estonian research, culture, society, and/or economy), the **coefficient** 0.8 is applied.

7.2.2. **An undifferentiated rating scale** is used for criteria 4, 5, and 7:

- Appropriate (1);
- Inappropriate (0).

7.2.3. **The final score** can range from 3.8 to 22 points.

7.2.4. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6:

- Unsatisfactory (1) – the application addresses many of the aspects of the evaluation criteria inadequately and/or there are serious inherent scientific weaknesses.
- Satisfactory (2) – the application addresses most of the aspects of the evaluation criteria in very general terms and there are significant weaknesses. Major revision and clarification would be needed to significantly improve the application.
- Good (3) – the application addresses most of the relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria well, but a number of shortcomings are present. Some questions on methodology, scope, and/or relevance of the project could be elaborated on more thoroughly and more clearly. A sound research project with some issues to be considered.
- Very good (4) – the application addresses all relevant aspects of the evaluation criteria very well and only a small number of shortcomings are present. Minor revision and clarification would be suggested. A strong research project worthy of funding.
- Outstanding (5) – the application is very well elaborated and—considering the early research career level of the applicant—excellent in both content and presentation. All aspects of the evaluation criteria have been met. A very promising project worthy of funding.

7.2.5. Interpretation of ratings for criteria 4, 5, and 7:

- Appropriate (1) – potential risks related to ethical issues and data management issues have been sufficiently addressed (please add a comment). The requested grant type and amount are well justified.
- Inappropriate (0) – potential risks related to ethical issues and data management issues have not been sufficiently addressed (adding a comment is obligatory). The grant type is not justified and the estimation of costs is unrealistic.

7.3. Threshold

There are two types of thresholds: the qualification threshold and quality threshold.

7.3.1. The qualification threshold for criteria 1, 2, 3, and 6 is 3 points (*good*) before applying the coefficient. The qualification threshold for criteria 4 and 5 is 1 point (*appropriate*). If an application receives less points than the threshold for at least one criterion, it does not qualify for funding, and limitations could be placed upon the applicant during the next call.

7.3.2. The field-specific quality thresholds for start-up grant applications are as follows:

- Natural sciences 18.6 points;
- Engineering and technology 17.7 points;
- Medical and health sciences 17.2 points;
- Agricultural and veterinary sciences 16.7 points;
- Social sciences 18.2 points;
- Humanities and the arts 18.6 points.

If an application receives less points than the quality threshold, it does not qualify for funding.

8. Overall assessment and the final score of the application

This section will be filled in by the Evaluation Committee.

- 8.1. The final score for the application is a sum of justified assessment scores for all criteria (1-7) and the overall assessment composed by the Evaluation Committee. The main arguments underlying the scores as well as the main strengths and weaknesses will be pointed out here.
- 8.2. Based on the final evaluation and scores, the Evaluation Committee will compile a ranking list for all applications.
- 8.3. If the budget is too small for funding all the projects which qualify for funding, then the procedure shall be as follows:
 - 8.3.1. the projects will be funded in the order they appear in the ranking list;
 - 8.3.2. the applications of equal standing will be ranked according to the scores received during the evaluation process in the very order of the evaluation criteria (i.e., as specified above);
 - 8.3.3. among the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 8.3.2 the applications which are based on a partially funded project from the previous call will be prioritised;
 - 8.3.4. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 8.3.3. will be prioritised according to the underrepresented gender among the applicants whose applications rank above the applications of equal standing;
 - 8.3.5. the applications which sustain equal standing after the ranking procedure described in 8.3.4. will be prioritised in order to create more diversity of the R&D fields;
 - 8.3.6. the ranking of the applications which sustain equal standing for all aforementioned criteria will be decided by lot in accordance with the conditions established by the Council.